COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS - MIDDLEBURY COLLEGE

"Memory as Prologue"

By Dr. James I. Armstrong
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Good morning:

It really is a pleasure to be here among you this Commencement morning, in this beautiful setting, to greet friends and to share in these happy ceremonies honoring the Class of 1977. And I thank you and President Robison for inviting me to make a return to these hills and these valleys which have been <u>your</u> home and always will be our home in some important measure, but I confess to you and your President straight away at the outset a heightened, heady and hearty appreciation of what I have asked a host of Commencement speakers to do from this platform.

You have lived in Vermont long enough to understand, and I long enough to become like the old Vermonter sitting on a summer's evening on the verandah while his wife of many years rocked beside him. "Katie," he finally burst out breaking his comfortable and customary silence, "sometimes when I consider how much you have meant to me all these years, it's all I can do to keep from telling you."

As this is probably the last chance I'll have to tell you, I'm going to risk it. I can no longer keep from telling you (given the opportunity) what <u>education</u> means to me, for it has been my life companion, what <u>Middlebury</u> means to me for its capacity to make this "education" happen, and what you mean to me for your ability to translate

"education" into perceptions and understandings and to make a difference in my future world. (You may not feel ready to "make a difference" for the world at the moment, but with me on the platform are graduates of this College who are making a significant difference in a variety of ways. Let them be assurance to you.)

I have chosen to speak this morning about three aspects of education which I honor--obviously I have been ruthlessly selective--so if nothing that I say corresponds to your educational experience, don't let it worry you!

First, I honor education because it seeks to make the mind "a practiced instrument of appreciation--" Professor Walter Stace, my philosophy teacher, told me (I have remembered it as a guidepost) that there are two ways to define an object: point to it or describe it. There is a pleasing economy in pointing; so let me point to the person of Alan Gussow as example of the object I want to present to you. Alan Gussow is painter, conservationist, Middlebury Class of 1952. He introduced himself to a Middlebury audience in 1974 in this way:

> "Here are some of the things I do: I paint, in summer mornings before breakfast, in winter after coffee, with cedar incense and fine cigars, I read poetry, listen to Indian ragas and Charles Ives, stretch canvas and rub my fingers over raw linen, smell wood, dig in the garden, use my body, compost egg shells, orange peels and all organic waste, plant seeds and harvest slowly, build fences and make boundaries, walk in the morning and see fresh leaves lifting earth, cut grass and walk

the yard in the evenings looking at our big green Victorian house from all sides, eat raw greens on all fours, nibble brussells sprouts, kale and stalks of asparagus, make breakfast for the family, read The New York Times, buy books, talk, ride a ten-speed bike around a morning lake, think hard, travel on jet planes and small planes, give speeches, organize exhibits, make a movie, write a book, listen to orioles, talk good talk with my wife, make love and hold hands, help clean the house, start things, launch ideas, testify in courts, lead delegations, plan a new college, shop for food, smile with my boys, answer letters slowly, camp at least once in winter, climb rocks, ford a river, repel down cliffs, remember where I have been, help other artists claim their own places, promote and scheme, dress like Clark Kent to raise money from foundations and return like Superman to my octagonal cupola and raise paintings."

Now that's it--a mind perceptive, sensitive to the natural world and to other human beings, remembering them, enjoying, savoring, engaging, at work. I think I might recognize Alan at a foundation office no matter what suit he had on! I would welcome him!

Second, I honor education because it helps fight cultural amnesia.

Somewhere deep within us is a need to know our past, historical, cultural, personal. It shouldn't astonish us that, since Alex Haley's personal search for his roots, the libraries and publishing houses and public record offices

all over the country have been flooded with requests for information. Perhaps the reason Roots has so captured the imagination of all sorts of people, is that it sounds that note to which we respond instinctively: how do I know where I'm going unless I know where I've been.

I have imagined in an attitude of curiosity and compassion what it would be like to have no memory. One thinks of the obvious difficulties--where do I live, do I have a job, but perhaps most importantly how do I know where I'm going if I don't know where I came from--i.e., if I have no knowledge of my own past or the past of others--no knowledge of accumulated experience. I imagine that to be a terrible, rootless feeling.

Imagine further the double tragedy of those who found it necessary or expedient to deny and suppress their cultural or religious identities when they came to this country in the waves of immigrants over the years received by the United States. And there quickly come to mind those proud and wise few who knew that this is the way to gain the world and lose your soul. Grandma Kizzy is one of those and stands clear for Alex Haley as a beacon in his search for his African heritage, in his search for himself.

In Roots, there is a poignant moment when the slave family of Mr. Lea is sold away to another plantation, and old grandmother Kizzy is being left behind and this is what she says, moved by the importance and finality of the moment. This is what she says "...if any you all gits more chilluns before I sees you again, don't forgit to tell 'em about my folks, my mammy Bell, and my African pappy name Kunta Kinte,

what be you chillun's great-great gran'pappy! Hear me now! Tell them about me, about my George, about you'selves, too! An' 'bout what we been through 'midst differen' massas. Tell de chilluns all de res' 'bout who we is!"

And at another point grandma Kizzy explains to her son Chicken George why she could not have married a man named Sam. "Sam wasn't like us," she says, "Nobody ever told him where he came from. So he didn't have a dream of where he ought to be goin'."

And I'm convinced that what you've been engaged in here, what Middlebury conceives to be its mission, is in one sense, that same search to know who we are--a search to combat the cultural amnesia with which we have recently been afflicted--to combat the "now" syndrome which robs us of dreams and visions and heroes. "Now" is too soon to grow roots or to know them. When the past is out of style, I think of Jack Kerouac's most famous line in the 1960s, "Man, we don't know where we're going but we gotta go!" For my educated person the past is always in style.

Third, I honor education because it helps to answer the all important and extended question "where do I live? That is to say, what do I think valuable?

Sometimes our values seem simply to have crept upon us and what we think is worthwhile gradually emerges. How in this technological, post industrial, scientific world does a young man turn to the Classics and find understanding and inspiration and meaning in Greek literature? No single answer, but I remember how enticed, lured and engaged I was--pheromones of attraction, when my father gave me a Latin

text of the New Testament and himself read the original Greek. So I had to learn Greek too--a grace which, growing from my roots, set my course into the Homeric epics and the mainstream of Hellenic literature, then into teaching and, yes, even into Old Chapel.

My work in Greek History immediately affected my response to Mr. Nixon's stated belief in his Frost television interview that "if the President does it, it is not illegal." In 399 B.C. Socrates called the laws his brothers and believed so strongly in their high importance to the community of man that he submitted steadfastly to their edicts, even to his own death. But he had no choice, one may say. Oh, but he did. After he was condemned by an Athenian court, he was offered a contrived escape to exile, which he refused. Why? What difference would it make whether he were dead or in exile except to himself, and in exile he would be alive. But the laws, what of them? They were his Brothers!

Recently in The New York Times I read of a man who had been a drug addict for 23 years. He turned around somehow and managed the tough task of getting himself together, and now he's involved in a program designed to help others get themselves together. "The first thing," he said, "he noticed when he got into the program was that people were talking about things he'd never heard of--things like values, principles and convictions." As far as he was concerned, "values were what you got at Macy's, principles ran schools, and convictions were what we got from the judge." He came to care deeply about individual persons, and to

believe that human values are real and human life of supreme worth. There is a story to my purpose of a Quaker who took his friend to a Quaker meeting. The friend, unfamiliar with the Quaker discipline, waited and waited for the service to begin. Nothing happened, all was silence. After what seemed an eternity the friend leaned over and in sotto voce asked, "when does the service begin?" The Quaker replied, "the service begins after we leave the meeting!" So it does with us all--especially for those who have a sense of the roots of our common humanity.

So finally you see I honor this Middlebury mainly because the College embodies the goals which insist upon humanity as a constant among student, teacher, and the potential humanism in the disciplines taught and seeks thereby to humanize the truth which is our goal and which frees the human spirit.

I love it for many other reasons: the straight-backed strength of its buildings, the soft grey color of limestone, the trees (how I guarded them), good people, these valleys and these mountains--an especially beautiful place in this unevenly endowed earth for this part of your journey.

I close with things hoped for. It is not as difficult to talk of the past as of the future--but finally, as the saying goes, that's where we're all going to spend the rest of our lives.

When we talk of the future, we must talk of hopes, visions, dreams and risks. We speak in the language of belief and conviction, but if we know what we hope for and have dreams of how things might be, we have a better chance

of affecting the shape of future things. Perhaps Middlebury could be said to have fashioned for you, as Daedelus for his son Icarus, wings for future flight. James Joyce speaks of this tiptoe moment in the last entry in the diary of Stephen Daedelus in his Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man. I give it to you now because I love it and because I heard it last at the marriage of two young future-people with visions of their own into which they hope to live, visions for themselves and for this valiant, struggling beautiful world.

> "The spell of arms and voices: the white arms of roads, their promise of close embraces and the black arms of tall ships that stand against the moon, their tale of distant nations. They are held out to say: we are alone. Come. And the voices say with them: We are your kinsmen, and the air is thick with their company as they call to me, their kinsmen, making ready to go, shaking the wings of their terrible and exhultant youth.
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> Mother is putting my new second hand clothes in order. She prays now, she says, that I may learn in my own life and away from home what the heart is and what it feels. Amen! So be it. Welcome, O life! I go to encounter for the millionth time the reality of experience and to forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race.
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> Old father, Old artificer, stand me now and forever in good stead.

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